
Abolitionists

by Eugene V. Debs

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In days, not so far away as to be forgotten by millions of men and women, the term "abolitionists" was one of crushing reproach, and he who dared plead guilty to the charge of being an abolitionist, was everywhere ostracized, and over a vast extent of territory the charge ranked with crimes which could be expiated only by imprisonment or death. Notwithstanding all this, abolition thrived, abolitionists accepted all the penalties, dared every peril, gloried in chains, prisons, exile and death. Their motto was no truce, no compromise. They saw the wrong, the curse, the crime of slavery, and they attacked it resolutely, continually, ceaselessly. They shaped events, they created circumstances, they grasped fate and destiny, and wrung from them decrees that slavery in the United States should cease. For all this they were maligned, persecuted and killed. William Lloyd Garrison, whose name was once the synonym for all things infamous, said in Philadelphia on one occasion:

There is too much quietude in this city. Your cause (the abolition cause) will not prosper here. The philosophy of reform forbids you to expect it, until it excites popular tumult, and brings down upon it a shower of brickbats and rotten eggs, and is threatened with a coat of tar and feathers.¹

The tumult came, it increased until the tramp of more than three million armed men shook the continent, and when the tumult ceased, more than six million slaves stood erect, free, emancipated by the power of agitation, tumult, discussion, led on from small beginnings, through fire and smoke and blood to results which constitute an epoch in history such as men and angels never before witnessed since time began.

¹ Speech at Pennsylvania Hall, Philadelphia, May 15, 1838. The hall was destroyed by a mob two days later.

It is in order to say that revolutions never go backwards. They may meet with enemy and be arrested for a while in their march, but they never abandon an inch of ground once gained. The idea holds the fort and succeeding efforts always begin where the preceding ones halted. Tyrants can't kill ideas, opinions, they live on, proof against faggot and wheel and halter. Indeed when an eloquent voice is *silenced* it is only heard the more *distinctly*, and by a thousand times larger audience, it echoes, reverberates around the world.

There are abolitionists now, not those who demand that chattel slavery shall cease where the stars and the stripes wave, an emblem of authority, because the slave pen and the slave block and the slave lash have disappeared, but there are those who behold every day other wrongs which they have set out to abolish, wrongs of a character which will admit of neither truce nor compromise, nothing will answer the requirement but their abolition. They are wrongs which take on some of the forms of slavery, wrongs which work the degradation of men, which sap the foundations of citizenship and imperil the stability of American institutions. The conflict is not between capital and labor, between money and misery, cash and credit, it is between man and man, the man who works and the man who pays, the man who employs and the man employed. It is between the man who holds the office and the man who holds the ballot. It is a conflict between right and wrong, truth and error, justice and injustice, a conflict between citizens who make everything, build everything and the men who simply supervise and manage.

Tumult has followed tumult. There has been and there is still agitation, unrest. The courts have been invoked and the military power has been exerted, but the revolution does not move backward, nor yet stand still. To those who are willing to study the situation, it is easily understood. The men who do the work demand fair pay for their labor, decent food, decent clothing, decent shelter, homes, such as become American sovereigns, clothed with the high responsibilities of shaping the destinies of the great American Republic. They are not peons, they are not helots, but freemen who have the ballot, and they will accept neither truce nor compromise, they will have their inalienable rights, and it is of the first importance for those who assume to manage affairs not to forget it.

As the case now stands, if the laws are right, they are criminally administered. If the laws are defective they will be repealed. If justice has been cloven down, it is to be re-enthroned. If in the olden times,

by God's decree, it was a sin to "muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn,"² what must be the damnable nature of laws and politics that make a supply of bread doubtful to those whose toil feeds the world, and worse still, subjects them to the pangs of hunger and starvation?

The revolution now in progress is not to change the form of government, it is not to abolish courts, overthrow institutions, but rather to make government, courts, and institutions subserve the happiness of the American people. We have sovereignty of the people, we have equality of conditions and responsibilities. We have made the ballot the standard, the majority must rule. The wage worker is not demanding a palace, he is not coveting the property of his more fortunate fellow citizen, but he is demanding in the distribution of the profits of labor, so much as shall redeem him and those dependent upon him from the curse of hunger and rags, and protect him and his family from beastly shelters.

It is worthwhile to say that this revolution may be peaceable. The tumult may be only the clash of contending opinions within the limits prescribed by law, but violent opposition to the reign of right may be productive of a state of affairs, the contemplation of which sends a shudder through all ranks and conditions. Let it be understood that wage men are everywhere organizing for the conflict. It is supreme folly for people to close their eyes to the fact, far better will it be for the country to enact wholesome laws, and fearlessly administer them. It is not a question for purse-proud arrogant corporations with Pinkerton's hired assassins to settle. The military can be better employed than in shooting down half fed and half starved citizens. Such things only change the character of the tumult, without settling any question in controversy. Courts are often bribed by a thing so insufferably contemptible as a railroad pass. Banks, the creatures of law, supply the funds to enable bucket shop brokers to corner food, and thus we might enumerate curses which ceaselessly create social political and industrial tumults. Manifestly such wrongs cannot continue. They will be swept away, abolished.

Abolitionists are not only increasing in number but in power It will be the part of wisdom to take the load off the backs of toilers, better for the lawmakers to arrest stupendous villainies, better for the courts to cease making distinctions, better at once to inaugurate a reign of justice and right. It can be done, it must be done, it will be

² *Deuteronomy*, chapter 26, verse 4.

done. The signs of the times declare that a revolution has begun, is on the march. The mass demand fair play. The constitution guarantees it, the laws must enforce it. Abolitionists point to the wrongs and say they must disappear, and as certain as tides ebb and flow they will disappear.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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